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KnowWhy #32 - Did Jacob Refer to Ancient Israelite Autumn Festivals?

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Abstract: Jacob's sermon recorded in 2 Nephi 6–10 contains many elements that link it with ancient Israelite autumn festivals such as the Feast of Tabernacles. These elements include the creation, holy garments, the name of God, sacrifice, fasting, God's judgment, and the remembrance of God's covenant. Likewise, Jacob's sermon includes details that seem to indicate it is a part of a covenant renewal ceremony, an ancient phenomenon that sometimes overlapped with Israelite autumn festivals. All together, these elements link the Book of Mormon with the Old Testament and the world of ancient Israel.



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Gord and palms (called lulav) used during the autumn festival of Sukkot as mentioned in Leviticus 23:40, via happyintlv.net

DID JACOB REFER TO ANCIENT ISRAELITE AUTUMN FESTIVALS?

“And now, behold, I would speak unto you concerning things which are, and which are to come; wherefore, I will read you the words of Isaiah.”
2 Nephi 6:4

The Know

Nephi consecrated his brother Jacob to the priesthood shortly after their group separated from the followers of Laman, Lemuel, and Ishmael. They established themselves in the Land of Nephi. A temple was built and, somewhat reluctantly, Nephi was acclaimed the first Nephite king (2 Nephi 6:2).

In that context, Jacob delivered a sermon that began with a recital of certain words that he found in Isaiah 49–52. “I will read you the words of Isaiah. And they are the words which my brother has desired that I should speak unto you. And I speak unto you for your sakes, that ye may learn and glorify the name of your God” (2 Nephi 6:4).

The themes discussed by Jacob in this speech (which begins in 2 Nephi 6 and ends in 2 Nephi 10) include such covenant or coronation motifs as the creation, holy garments, the name of God, sacrifice, fasting, God’s judgment, and the remembrance of God’s covenant.

Although some have read these chapters without wondering about the possible backgrounds of the discourse, one LDS scholar has looked closely at Jacob’s sermon

to do just that. John S. Thompson has discovered the speech contains elements which parallel salient features of the ancient Israelite autumn festivals (especially the Feast of Tabernacles or Sukkot).

Thompson begins his study by observing that 2 Nephi 6–10 follows the covenant/treaty pattern which is now widely recognized as being found “throughout much of the ancient Near East.” This pattern consists of:

- A preamble
- A historical overview and covenant speech
- Defining the stipulations of the covenant,
- Promising blessings and cursings for upholding or breaking the covenant
- A witness formula, and
- A recording of the covenant.¹

The presence of these elements in Jacob’s sermon is significant, Thompson insisted, because they ground Jacob’s speech in a specific context. “The presence of the covenant pattern in Jacob’s sermon raises the question, Under what circumstances would Jacob have made such a speech,” including quoting these specific passages from Isaiah?

The answer: “The presence of this structure in Jacob’s sermon” strongly suggests he is delivering it during the Feast of Tabernacles, where, according to some scholars, this same pattern was sometimes followed anciently by the children of Israel in renewing their covenant with Jehovah or in installing a new earthly king.² Thompson concludes, “From the structure and themes of 2 Nephi 6–10, one may conclude that Jacob’s speech was given in connection with a covenant-renewal celebration that was most likely performed as part of the traditional Israelite autumn festivals required by the law of Moses.”³

In speaking about a covenant-renewal celebration, Thompson is referring to an event where members of a covenant community renew their covenants with God and rededicate themselves to keep his commandments. An example of this can be seen in Joshua 24, where Joshua gathered “all the tribes of Israel” to renew their covenants before claiming the land of Canaan as their inheritance (Joshua 24:1). This included swearing loyalty to and faith in the Lord and not worshipping other gods.

Now therefore fear the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in truth: and put away the gods which your fathers served on the other side of the flood, and in Egypt; and serve ye the Lord. And if it seem evil unto you to serve the Lord, choose you this day whom ye will serve; whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the flood, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell: but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord. (Joshua 24:14–15)

Considering that this sermon was delivered at a time when the Nephites were similarly establishing themselves in a new land, it becomes clear that Jacob’s words reflect this ancient Israelite religious covenant-renewal custom. Thompson identifies these sections of Jacob’s sermon as containing the covenant-renewal elements:

- Preamble = 2 Nephi 6:1–4
- Historical overview = 2 Nephi 6:5–9, 22
- Stipulations of the covenant = 2 Nephi 9:23–26
- Blessings and cursings = 2 Nephi 9:27–43
- Witness formula = 2 Nephi 9:44
- Recording the covenant = 2 Nephi 9:52.⁴

In addition, Jacob’s use of words from Isaiah 49–52 and other passages (such as Leviticus 16, 23; Deuteronomy 31; Isaiah 55) makes sense in light of the fact that these chapters also “reflect much of [the] traditional scenario” involving the enthronement of earthly kings during the autumn festivals.⁵ Such elements include:

- Creation in Isaiah 51:13 = 2 Nephi 8:13
- The name of God in Isaiah 51:15 = 2 Nephi 8:15
- The voice of God’s servant in Isaiah 50:10 = 2 Nephi 7:10
- The law in Isaiah 51:4 = 2 Nephi 8:4
- Judgment in Isaiah 51:4–5 = 2 Nephi 8:4–5
- Deliverance in Isaiah 50:2 = 2 Nephi 7:2

This is not to say that all covenant-renewal ceremonies are coronation and autumn festivals or that all autumn festivals involve coronations and covenant-renewal ceremonies. Rather, it is to say that these separate phenomena are believed to have overlapped in the world of ancient Israel and appear to overlap in Jacob’s sermon.

The Why

Appreciating the complexity of Jacob’s interweaving of these themes and texts is interesting and useful at several levels. For one thing, these identifiable motifs obviously connect the Book of Mormon to the culture of ancient Israel, which reinforces the book’s antiquity and consistency with the biblical record, helping these two books to become one in our hands today.

The importance and function of righteous kingship is also a strong teaching touched on many times in the Book of Mormon, and so it isn’t hard to assume that Jacob’s sermon served as a theological and ritual precedent for later Nephite kings to follow. For example, many of the same points found in Jacob’s sermon and similar covenant-renewal ceremonies would be incorporated into King Benjamin’s own speech four centuries later in Nephite history (Mosiah 2–6).⁶

Ultimately, Jacob’s speech highlights the focus the Nephites maintained in reinforcing faith in Christ. Thompson concludes, “Since Israelite festivals were included in the law of Moses, the Nephites likely carried them out with full understanding that the elements of the festival all typify of Christ and point to his coming.”⁷

Developing faith in Christ, both for the ancient Nephites and for modern Latter-day Saints, includes making, keeping, and renewing sacred covenants. Just as modern religious holidays (such as Easter and Christmas) include specific themes and cultural practices, so too ancient religious holidays or festivals (such as the Feast of Tabernacles) included specific themes and cultural practices which appear in the Book of Mormon, reminding us to choose to serve the Lord and keep his covenant.

Further Reading

John S. Thompson, “Isaiah 50–51, the Israelite Autumn Festivals, and the Covenant Speech of Jacob in 2 Nephi 6–10,” in *Isaiah in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Donald W. Parry and John W. Welch (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1998), 123–150.

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NOTES

1. John S. Thompson, “Isaiah 50–51, the Israelite Autumn Festivals, and the Covenant Speech of Jacob in 2 Nephi 6–10,” in *Isaiah in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Donald W. Parry and John W. Welch (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1998), 124–127.
2. Thompson, “Isaiah 50–51, the Israelite Autumn Festivals, and the Covenant Speech of Jacob in 2 Nephi 6–10,” 127.
3. Thompson, “Isaiah 50–51, the Israelite Autumn Festivals, and the Covenant Speech of Jacob in 2 Nephi 6–10,” 143.
4. Thompson, “Isaiah 50–51, the Israelite Autumn Festivals, and the Covenant Speech of Jacob in 2 Nephi 6–10,” 126–27. See also the commentary offered by Brant Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 2:157–159.
5. Thompson, “Isaiah 50–51, the Israelite Autumn Festivals, and the Covenant Speech of Jacob in 2 Nephi 6–10,” 140.
6. See primarily John W. Welch and Stephen D. Ricks, ed., *King Benjamin’s Speech: “That Ye May Learn Wisdom”* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1998).
7. Thompson, “Isaiah 50–51, the Israelite Autumn Festivals, and the Covenant Speech of Jacob in 2 Nephi 6–10,” 144.